

What Is Mass Hysteria?

Updated On: 20 Oct 2020 By John Staughton

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Mass hysteria, more formally known as mass psychogenic illness (MPI), is the spread of illness symptoms or physiological changes that have no bacterial, environmental or pathogenic cause. Such cases of mass hysteria have been documented for hundreds of years, and continue to this day!

During the Salem Witch Trials of 1692-1693 in colonial Massachusetts, 19 people were killed on suspicion of being witches or practitioners of the dark arts. More than 200 people were accused, and the entire tragedy was an example of mass hysteria. After a handful of girls displayed physical symptoms similar to epileptic fits, accusations of witchcraft began to spread among the colonial settlers. Neighbors turned against one another, false reports were made, and physical symptoms manifested in more citizens. This remains one of the most famous and deadliest examples of mass hysteria in history, but it is far from the only one.

Even in this information age of the 21st century, with smartphones and instant access to articles about mass hysteria, there are still examples of this phenomenon happening around the world. What in the world could cause such bizarre events of collective weirdness?



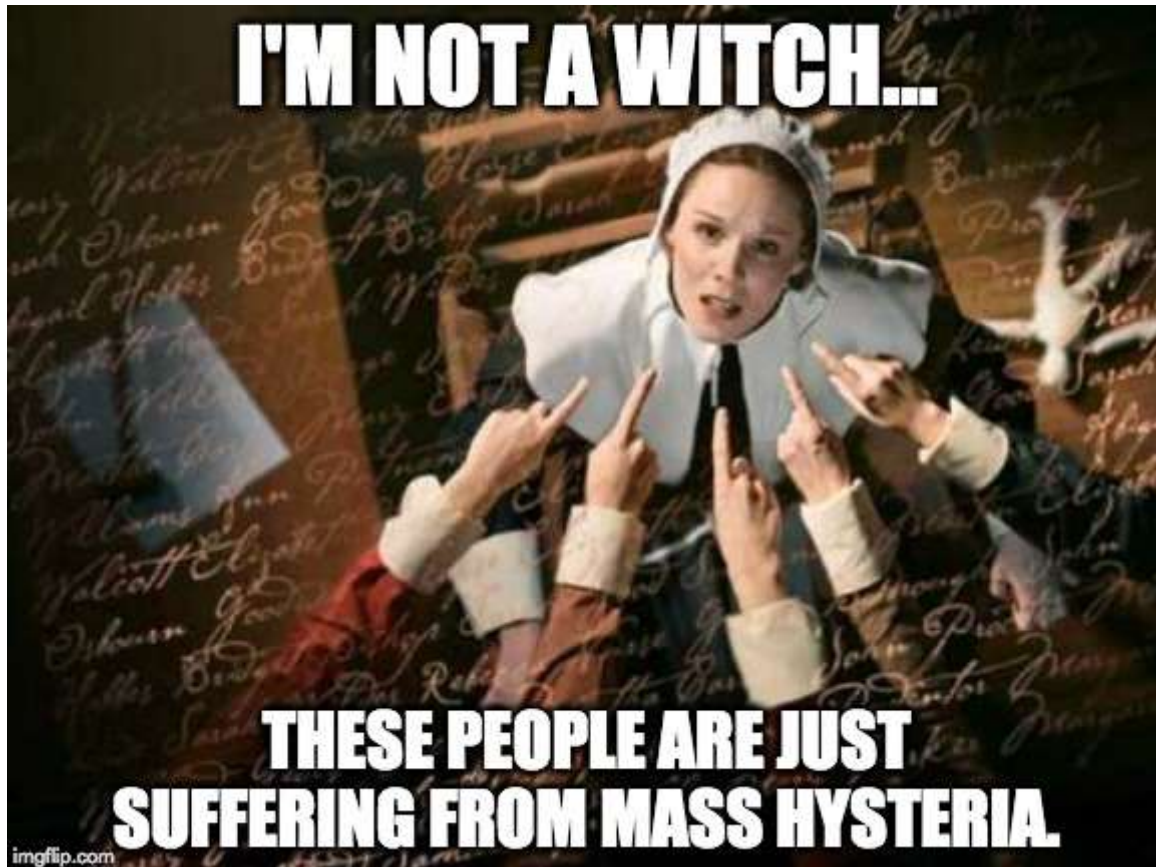
Information age: highly connected world of the 21st century (Photo Credit : Sahacha Nilkumhang/Shutterstock)

What is Mass Hysteria?

Mass hysteria is medically classified as a mass psychogenic disorder, meaning that it is a condition that begins in the mind, rather than the body. Imagine dozens of nuns in a convent that begin meowing at one another (Middle Ages), or hundreds of soldiers all begin to experience respiratory symptoms, despite not

being exposed to any toxins or pathogens (1988). Whereas a contagious pathogen can be traced by its physical movement between hosts, mass hysteria spreads like a contagious outbreak of fear, anxiety or mania.

Although there is not technically a “cause” that can be pointed towards, the symptoms that manifest are often very real, including dizziness, headaches, vomiting, fainting, biting, dancing, flailing, spasming and dozens of other manifestations that have been documented throughout history.



Given the strange nature of this phenomenon, it has been the subject of intense study and speculation over the years. Simon Wesley, a British psychiatrist, suggested that there are two forms of mass psychogenic illness—**mass anxiety hysteria** and **mass motor hysteria**. The former is characterized by the experience of intense anxiety, and is often accompanied by recognizable symptoms of anxiety, including nausea, headaches, dizziness, difficulty breathing, vomiting, fainting and psychological distress. This type of hysteria is believed to spread through visual contact with others experiencing these symptoms, which induces similar symptoms in the observer. This “line of sight” causation is coupled with other individuals in the same environment who are *not* experiencing any negative symptoms.

The second form of mass psychogenic illness—mass motor hysteria—is characterized by strange motor activity in the body; anxiety symptoms often

develop before a physical manifestation appears. This could include biting, dancing, running, jumping, partial paralysis, trembling, or more violent physical tics and outbursts. Unlike mass anxiety hysteria, this variety tends to spread more gradually, and may last for longer periods of time. In some cases in history, mass motor hysteria has persisted for weeks or even months.

Causes and Characteristics of Mass Hysteria

This unusual phenomenon is still poorly understood in the medical community, as the conditions cannot be organically replicated; when a case arises, it can be studied in the moment, but due to certain characteristics of “epidemic hysteria”, long-term study or analysis is impossible. The causes behind these instances vary widely, but there are some clear elements to its etiology.

- **Isolation / Societal Segregation** – In many cases of mass psychogenic illness, those affected are in an isolated or segregated group, such as a convent, school, rural community or military base etc. The community tends to be close-knit and may be subject to the same type of lifestyle or belief structure. This slight distance from the rest of the world is believed to help cultivate and spread this phenomenon. You will rarely see an outsider coming into such a situation and becoming afflicted by the MPI.
- **High-Anxiety Situation** – There is usually a significant increase in anxiety that accompanies such an event. This could be driven by an acute situation, such as the fear of spreading disease after one towns person mysterious falls ill. It could also be a more chronic anxiety issue, such as the general nervousness leading up to a military campaign, a long-term shortage of food, an oppressive culture or government, or an elevated fear of bioterrorism. When these fears are shared among the group, an MPI is more readily triggered. Some experts suggest that throughout history, intense

psychological anxiety has led to mass hysteria as a means of escape or relief; abandoning normality and reality can be an effective defense of the mind against existential (or real) threats.

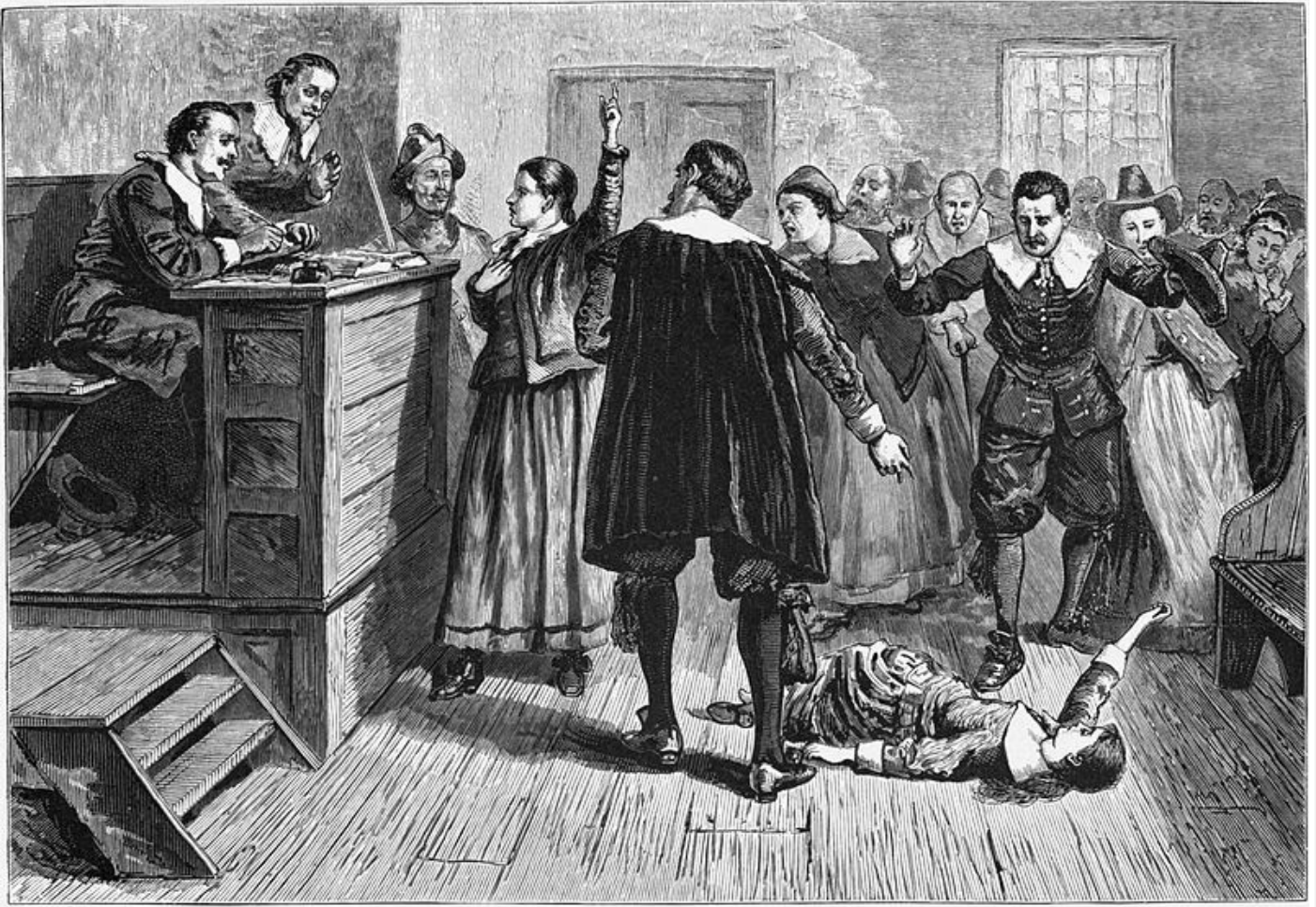


Fear of bioterrorism can trigger MPI (mass psychogenic illness) (Photo Credit : Aha-Soft/Shutterstock)

- **Transient, Benign and Sourceless Symptoms** – Although some of the symptoms can be intense, such as wild spasms and vomiting, they are generally harmless and pass relatively quickly (minutes, hours or days). There is no obvious source for these symptoms (e.g., pathogens, [bacteria](#), environmental toxins), and they rarely pose a direct threat to a person's health. Remember, a physical agent doesn't need to be responsible; our minds can generate a physiological response just as easily.



- **Primarily Affecting Females** – Although there are many heterogeneous examples of mass psychogenic illness, these phenomena have predominantly affected females. Use of the “term” hysteria has largely been discontinued in medical practice and discussion, as it was abused and overused in relation to feminine behavior and psychological frailty in the past century. However, women are often exposed to stressful situations in isolated settings; combined with emotional openness and empathy, this may explain why women seem more commonly affected than men.
- **Age Pattern** – The symptoms often begin in older or more respected members of a group and community, and gradually move down the age range. This was the case in the Salem Witch Trials and many other famous examples. It is as though younger people “take the lead” from older, established individuals. A young person’s trust and inherent respect for an elder makes them more likely to believe in the apparent danger and even fall victim to the same symptoms. This “age cascade” is also interesting in that younger people often show symptoms for a shorter period of time than older sufferers.



The infamous Salem Witch Trials (Photo Credit : unattributed/Wikimedia Commons)

- **Serious Threat** – The appearance of symptoms initially seems like the outbreak of a more serious disease or infection. For this reason, even if people suspect an incident to be an episode of mass hysteria, the threat must be taken seriously. School closures, hospitalizations and large-scale responses to outbreaks can increase the legitimacy of the danger, which may lead others to begin developing symptoms. Such a phenomenon can only be identified as an MPI in retrospect, whereas during the event, it must be approached as a serious threat.

A Final Word

While the likelihood of experiencing an episode of mass hysteria is small, it is far from impossible. As recently as last year (2019), there have been documented cases of mass psychogenic illness, in which more than 60 students were apparently afflicted by an unusual respiratory condition and the school was shut down. After a thorough analysis and inspection of the school, it was deemed a mass psychogenic event.